

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## FOSTER PARENT PLAN FOR WHOOPING CRANES TRIED

A unique experimental foster parent plan for the endangered whooping crane was started May 29 by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and the University of Idaho, Keith M. Schreiner, head of Federal endangered species programs, announced.

Fourteen whooping crane eggs were taken from wild nests in Canada and placed in the nests of greater sandhill cranes in Idaho with the expectation that the sandhill cranes will hatch the eggs and raise the chicks as their own young.

The idea behind the unique experiment is to establish a second population of whooping cranes in the wild, thus strengthening their precarious existence as a species.

Only 49 whooping cranes now exist in the wild. This population winters at one spot on the Texas Gulf Coast and summers in the Canadian Northwest Territories. If a second population is successfully established, it is anticipated that it will winter in New Mexico and summer in the Idaho-Wyoming-Montana region.

Removal of whooping crane eggs from wild nests does not jeopardize the size of the original wild flock. Whoopers normally lay and hatch two eggs in a nest, but one chick almost always dies. This is thought to occur because one of the chicks becomes the dominant sibling and either gets all the food from the parents or pecks its weaker sibling to death.

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Eggs have been taken from wild whooping crane nests five times since 1967. They have been hatched in incubators at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, and today 19 of these offspring compose the bulk of the captive breeding flock of 21 birds.

The Canadian Wildlife Service supervised the egg-napping at the Wood Buffalo National Park. They expected to pick up anywhere from 6 to 16 whooper eggs, depending on the number of nests with two eggs apiece. The eggs were placed in insulated suitcases, supplied with oxygen, and flown to Idaho where they were transferred to pre-selected sandhill crane nests.

The foster parents for the whooping cranes have been hand-picked by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Their selection was based upon a six-year study of banding data and observations of marked sandhill cranes done by the Idaho Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit of the College of Forestry, Wildlife, and Range Science of the University of Idaho. Sandhill cranes are close relatives of whoopers. Moreover, these cranes form the same kind of strong family units that whoopers do. Parents stay together many years. Individual families that showed a particular fidelity to wintering on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico and nesting each summer on the Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho were chosen because sites on the refuges should provide a greater degree of safety to the whooper chicks than would sites off the refuges.

The whooper chicks will think the sandhill cranes are their parents. Many wild birds are "imprinted" with the sound and sight of the first living thing they encounter in the first hours after hatching. The birds become emotionally attached to any such creature and depend upon it through the first year. (This phenomenon was the basis for the film, "The Incredible Flight of the Snow Geese," in which goslings were "imprinted" on humans.) Next fall, while still dependent on their sandhill crane "parents," the young whoopers are expected to follow their foster parents from Idaho to New Mexico where they will spend the winter. Thereafter, they are expected to adopt these spots as their "summer and winter homes."

It is anticipated that the whooper young will remain with their foster parents throughout next winter and return with them to Idaho in the spring of 1976. At that time the young--now called juveniles--are "liberated" by the parents. The sandhill crane foster parents will stake out a 40-acre territory for breeding and nesting and lose all interest in the whooper juveniles. The juveniles will almost literally be kicked out on their own by the foster parents. If they venture back onto their foster parent's territory they will be driven off with ferocity.

It is expected that the juvenile whoopers and sandhill cranes will spend the next 4 to 5 years congregating on the fringes of the adult flock. They go through an adolescent period marked by occasional misbehavior such as trying to harass adult cranes on their territory or roaming off the familiar living space of cranes.

When the whoopers mature sexually in 5 to 7 years, it is expected that they will naturally select whooping crane mates. In addition to plumage and size differences, the mating calls and ritual dance of whooping cranes are different from those of sandhill cranes, so a female of one species might be unresponsive to the courting of a male of another species.

Male sandhill cranes, for example, emit a rolling mating call that sounds like a stick run along a picket fence. The female, in response, adds a chop-chop sound at the silent intervals. Male whooping cranes, on the other hand, trumpet a continuous note that some say sounds like "guru," and the female joins in unison with him with a similar sound.

If by some unforeseen set of circumstances pairing of a whooper and a sandhill crane does occur, it is planned to separate these birds from the flock so that hybrids will not be produced.

During their first year with their foster parents the whooper chicks will have a human babysitter. Dr. Rod Drewien of the University of Idaho Wildlife Cooperative Unit, under contract to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will closely monitor their hatching and rearing at the nest sites throughout the summer. Next fall, he will travel in a pickup truck south along the Rio Grande as the cranes fly overhead to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. Additionally he will stay with them through their first winter.

Many questions remain to be answered in this experiment. The normal diet of whooping cranes differs somewhat from the sandhill cranes. Whoopers appear to prefer water crustaceans. Sandhill cranes prefer grain. However, it is a matter similar to one man preferring cornbread and another steak. Both birds have the same range of food tolerance, and can derive enough nutrition from either food to live a healthy life.

Nesting habits differ somewhat also. Whoopers prefer marshy areas. Sandhills prefer solid ground at a marsh's edge.

Behavior of the adopted whoopers is the phenomenon scientists will be watching most closely to answer the timeless question of instinctive versus conditioned behavior. Dr. Drewien hopes to document each and every step of the whoopers' adaptation to life under the parental guidance of sandhill cranes during their first year. The lessons learned from this experiment will serve as the basis for future decisions regarding whooping crane restoration work.

Live press coverage and public sightseeing at the refuge is prohibited because of the critical nesting requirements of the sandhill crane foster parents. These shy, sensitive birds will desert a nest with eggs in it if undue disturbance occurs. Sightseeing and photography would constitute just such a disturbance so therefore only U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists will be permitted in the transplant area. Their numbers and frequency of observation will be severely restricted also. The eggs are expected to hatch between June 5 and 15.

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